

### Opportunities for Adventure Play

**Date:** August 23, 2017

**To:** Parks and Environment Committee

**From:** General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation

**Wards:** All

#### SUMMARY

---

The purpose of this report is to respond to the request from the Parks and Environment Committee to review opportunities to build/implement adventure playgrounds in City of Toronto parks.

An adventure playground is a specific type of supervised playground where children are permitted to build and alter their own play environment using materials provided on site. Adventure playgrounds have existed in some countries - notably Denmark, the United Kingdom and Germany - since the mid-1940s, and there is currently some resurgence in interest in the potential benefits to children that they can provide.

Research indicates that adventure playgrounds can be beneficial to the healthy physical, emotional and social development of the children who use them. This report suggests that Parks, Forestry and Recreation continue to engage with organizations such as Earth Day Canada to see if an appropriate model of adventure playground can be developed.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

---

The General Manager of Parks, Forestry and Recreation recommends that:

1. The Parks and Environment Committee receive this report for information.

#### FINANCIAL IMPACT

---

There are no financial implications resulting from the adoption of this report.

## DECISION HISTORY

---

At its meeting of June 16, 2016, through item PE12.2, the Parks and Environment Committee requested the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to review opportunities to build/implement adventure playgrounds in City of Toronto parks, and report back.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2016.PE12.2>

## COMMENTS

---

### **What are Adventure Playgrounds?**

Adventure playgrounds are typically defined as children's play spaces with few or no play structures but with materials and sometimes tools available for children to use in order to modify their play environment. They differ from conventional children's playgrounds in that there are no manufactured slides, swings, climbing structures or other typical pieces of playground equipment. Instead, re-purposed building materials and common or everyday items are made available for children to play with either as they are, or for children to shape and combine into new play elements as they see fit.

There can be a broad range of materials and items provided in an adventure playground. At one end of the spectrum there may be cardboard tubes and boxes, milk crates, cable spools, tires, plastic barrels and pails delivered to a site for temporary, supervised use lasting a few hours to a day. The materials are then gathered up and removed for re-use at a new location.

At the other end of the spectrum, there may be lumber, plywood, drainage pipes, ropes, hammers, nails, saws, shovels and paint available for the children to use. With those materials and tools, the children can build a variety of structures and play scenarios. These types of adventure playground exist in many countries including Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and Germany. The adventure playgrounds are supervised by experienced play leaders who assist and facilitate with the activities, and who ensure the safety of the children on site. The playgrounds typically have a secure perimeter and a controlled access point, and have scheduled hours of operation. As well, they often have a defined and posted code of conduct, and sometimes there are liability waivers for adult care-givers to sign before a child can enter the site.

### **What are the Benefits of Adventure Playgrounds?**

Experts believe that unstructured "free" play with an element of risk such as is provided by adventure playgrounds can be beneficial to the healthy development of children. Free play is self-directed play that is not bound by the rules and structure of organized sports or activities. The potential benefits of free play with moderate risks include teaching children to better assess and manage risks, and promoting the development of greater self-confidence through allowing children to successfully deal with risks and manage their fears. This may be important in an era when children are often discouraged from taking any risks at all by their parents or care-givers.

A 2015 report by ParticipACTION found that children consider less challenging play equipment to be boring and are less likely to stay active on playgrounds that are "safe". Consequently, adventure playgrounds with their higher degree of perceived risk may keep children engaged, interested and physically active for longer periods.

Adventure playgrounds also provide children with opportunities to use their imaginations in ways that conventional playgrounds may not. They give children the freedom to conceptualize and implement changes to their environment with the elements at hand, and they allow children to conceive of new ways to use common items for new purposes.

Adventure playgrounds can provide opportunities for children to learn new skills, and to problem-solve by working through a project from conception to completion. And by collaborating on the construction of elements within the playground, children learn cooperation and other important social skills while working in a group setting.

For these reasons there has been a resurgence in interest in implementing adventure playgrounds in Canada and elsewhere.

### **Adventure Playgrounds in the City of Toronto**

Dufferin Grove Park is the only true example of an adventure playground in Toronto. The site includes a large sand pile with a water spout, various sized shovels, pails and digging tools, and assorted lumber, tubing and natural features. The Dufferin Grove approach has been a collaboration with Friends of Dufferin Grove Park and CELOS and provides for both dedicated staff and volunteers in the park throughout the year. The playground is combined with regular play features, and a wading pool.

Parks Forestry and Recreation has been installing more challenging, interesting and engaging equipment through the City's Playground Replacement Program in recent years. Net climbers of various sizes and configurations, for example, have become increasingly popular, as have rock climbing walls and climbing boulders, tall slides built into embankments, spinner bowls and large swings that can be used by a number of children at once. A number of large sand piles have also been installed at a variety of parks.

City staff have also been redesigning playgrounds with re-purposed natural materials such as tree trunks, stumps and boulders within children's playgrounds. Recent examples include McCleary Playground, Margaret Fairly Parkette and Snider Parkette. These elements have been identified through the public consultation process of capital projects with residents recognizing that introducing these natural materials can help children to develop an appreciation of and connection with the natural environment.

## **Considerations for an Expanded Adventure Playground Program**

If the City were to fully implement adventure playgrounds a number of items would need to be considered, including:

1. There would need to be an examination of the potential risks and liabilities associated with adventure playgrounds through the City's Risk Management Office and through the Office of the City Solicitor.
2. Safety standards, maintenance regimes and inspection protocols similar to those that exist for conventional playgrounds would need to be established.
3. Dedicated play leaders or sites with dedicated staff would be required for appropriate supervision.
4. Facilities may be required to support an adventure playground, such as washrooms, equipment storage space, parking and municipal services (i.e. water).
5. Careful consideration would have to be given to site selection as the facility would likely draw participants from a larger catchment area than a standard local playground.

### **Next Steps**

Staff will continue to explore the implementation of Adventure Playgrounds, or components of these, in the design of parks and in playground refurbishments. Staff will also explore how to engage third party groups and organizations and existing staff resources that can provide supervised adventure playground programs in City parks, including pop-up or temporary locations.

### **CONTACT**

---

Michael Schreiner, Director, Parks Development and Capital Projects, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, Tel: 416-392-8453, Email: [Michael.Schreiner@toronto.ca](mailto:Michael.Schreiner@toronto.ca)

Robert Gibson, Manager, Special Projects, Parks Development and Capital Projects, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, Tel: 416-338-7639, Email: [Robert.Gibson@toronto.ca](mailto:Robert.Gibson@toronto.ca)

### **SIGNATURE**

---

Janie Romoff  
General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation